

Chapter 6

Using Critical Theory in Educational Research



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Abstract Critical theory remains a central theoretical framework in research for equity and social justice. In this chapter, we introduce some of the major concepts in critical theory and the educational theory of critical pedagogy. We also attempt to differentiate critical theory from other perspectives like critical race theory, with which it is often conflated. We also suggest ways in which critical theory can be mobilized in educational research. While a short chapter such as this cannot capture the complexity and long history of critical theory and critical pedagogy approaches, we aim to provide a useful introduction and resources for those wishing to go further with this perspective.

Critical theory is a powerful analytic frame for understanding educational disparities and injustice as functions of power, domination, and exploitation. Often confused with other perspectives, critical theory centers economic, financial, and labor issues as central animating forces in oppression and domination. It is easy to hear the phrase ‘critical theory’ and think of it as a kind of umbrella term for other critical perspectives (critical race theory, critical whiteness, DisCrit, and other perspectives). However, critical theory is a distinct set of theoretical and analytical tools which sometimes overlap with and sometimes diverge from other perspectives.

Key to understanding critical theory and how it differs from other perspectives is the fact that it emerges from Marxist critique (Horkheimer, 1982). That Marxist heritage shapes many of the assumptions and applications of critical theory. This means that critical theory centers class-based struggle and economic oppression. That is, in the clearest sense of critical theory, oppression, domination, and power are

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primarily understood through economics, labor, and class struggle. That is not to say that critical theory or critical theorists deny the reality of racism, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, or any other forms of oppression. To the contrary, those systems are all potent in their subjugation of marginalized groups. However, this approach does view those dynamics as being, at their core, economic systems. Because of that, the central organizing feature of those oppressive systems is, in the US context at least, capitalism (Postone & Galambos, 1995). That said, contemporary uses of critical theory are often a bit removed from a true Marxist analysis but are still informed by that perspective and shaped by that history.

One critique of critical theory and related approaches is a positivist impulse (Gottesman, 2016). That is, because of its roots as a Marxist approach, critical theory tends to envision an ideal society. The envisioning of an ideal carries with it an implicit belief in an absolute truth (a perfect society) which individuals can strive to approximate. Many contemporary critical theorists address that impulse directly and pull from poststructuralist, postcolonial, and other perspectives. However, it remains true that critical theory has some positivist flavor which those using the theory ought to carefully reflect upon and work to reimagine. Another critique of critical theory is that it, in the view of some, insufficiently centers things like race/racism and gender/sexism. Critical theoretical approaches typically reject the material reality of social identities like race, gender, and sexual identity (Leonardo, 2013), and like many other approaches, critical theorists often suggest that those social identities are ideological constructions rather than material realities. That is, race is not 'real' in the sense that there is no actual material state one can adequately describe as 'race'. However, race has been constructed as a category that means a great deal in society. Moreover, race has been constructed in binary ways (white/people of Color) that privilege White people and allow them to accumulate wealth and power at the expense of (and as a product of the labor of) people of Color. In fact, it takes a great deal of sustained effort to elevate the symbolism of skin color variations to the ideological status of binary racial categories (Leonardo, 2013). Similar arguments could be made about other social identities—the identity categories themselves are ideological constructs that have taken on the meanings of a white supremacist cisheteropatriarchal society, and their construction is a way in which those in power justify and extend oppression and dehumanization. In other words, race is not a material reality, but race matters very much and racism is all too real. Denying the material reality of those social identities need not decenter systems of oppression that operate on social identity. Rather, that rejection of static or 'real' social identities can shift the focus away from individual bodies and onto systems that commodify, exploit, and oppress those bodies.

In this short chapter, we attempt to introduce some of the key concepts in critical theory. We use the terms critical theory and critical pedagogy as somewhat interchangeable throughout. While that perhaps shows ideological or theoretical slippage in our own conceptualizations, it is also true that they are often used as if they were interchangeable in the research literature. We do not intend to imply there are no differences—but for the purposes of a text on educational research, the distinctions are muddier as critical pedagogy adopts and expands many of the tenets of critical theory (Giroux, 1997) with specific applications to education, teaching, and schools.

Commodification of Knowledge/Power

One of the key developments in modern educational reform, which has occurred alongside the rise of neoliberalism, is the commodification of knowledge (which critical pedagogy holds is an inseparable concept from power (McLaren, 2002)). Increasingly, discourses around education center on its value in monetary and labor-force terms. While prior eras included an understanding of education as a public good (Bowles & Gintis, 2011) that bestowed benefits on society by producing informed citizens capable of self-governance (Huang, Van den Brink, & Groot, 2009), the neoliberal turn brought with it an emphasis on education as a private good (Olssen & Peters, 2005) that benefits individuals by improving their economic status (Bourdieu, 2011) or by providing a more skilled pool of laborers for corporate interests (Helliwell & Putnam, 2007). Alongside this turn came objections to public funding of colleges and universities (with logics such as, ‘why should I pay for someone else to get a better job?’). There is much to say about this turn, as others have done elsewhere (Strunk, Locke, & McGee, 2015). However, important to this discussion of critical theory is the construction of knowledge (and thus, of schooling and education) as a set of commodities whose value is primarily monetary and labor related.

By commodifying knowledge, in a critical theory analysis, one also commodifies power. Power takes on a monetary value (and thus can be assigned a price), incentivizing those with power to oppress others through educational systems in order to preserve their societal advantage. This point is particularly important—systems of power, domination, and oppression primarily serve to preserve the power and wealth of those in dominant social positions and to ensure that fewer and fewer individuals accumulate more and more power and wealth. In our context, those power and wealth divides fall along racialized, gendered, sexualized, and other identity category lines, such that white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy becomes fused with economic systems of exploitative capitalism. However, critical theory not only observes this commodification and the ways it motivates oppressive systems but also explains how those systems come to be and how they operate to ensure oppressive outcomes.

Dialectical Theory

A central feature of the critical theory approach is dialectical theory—the notion that individuals are created by and simultaneously create social realities (Kemmis & Fitzclarence, 1986). This concept involves a recognition that individuals exist in relationship with a social world that has shaped them and their knowledges, while simultaneously recognizing that individuals also comprise the social context and their actions shape its contours. For example, the institution of schooling creates specific social realities for children (realities which are limited and delimited by oppression, shaping some students to be laborers and others to hold power and

wealth). However, schools comprise other people (who, of course, used to be schoolchildren), whose actions, ideologies, and beliefs shape what is taught, how it is taught, and to whom. Moreover, the children attending the school, through their actions, questions, beliefs, and embodied social identities, also shape the process of schooling.

As a result, systems (like schools) are replete with contradictions. Those contradictions open possibilities for making visible the operations of power and for interrupting oppressive cycles. In fact, one apparent contradiction that schools inhabit is that they often serve simultaneously as places of oppression and of empowerment (Giroux, 1981). Because of the tension that exists in the relationship between individuals and their contexts (where both the individual and the context are continually acting to shape one another), such contradictions emerge and require “new constructive thinking and new constructive action... to transcend the contradictory state of affairs” (Carr & Kemmis, 1983, p. 36). Such actions can potentially move systems toward equity and liberation, but more often individuals act to uphold the oppressive status quo, often because those who benefit from the status quo are also those with power.

Ideological Domination

Within this complex system of socially constructed realities, ideological domination takes hold. Because certain ideologies also uphold the privileging of some groups and oppression of others and render that inequitable economic situation both comprehensible and justifiable, those ideologies become dominant, reified as part of the ‘common sense’ (Giroux, 2011). In the US context (as in most contexts), that dominant ideology is capitalist white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy. This ideology holds that white, straight, cisgender men are inherently better than other groups (people of Color, LGBTQ people, women, etc.) and thus are deserving of a superior social position. It justifies the imposition of oppressive practices and inequitable outcomes as a just and righteous intervention to ensure those worthy of economic gains and of power maintain it. As others have suggested, this dominant ideology is visible in the ways research methods have evolved (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008), how economies are structured, and helps explain things like slavery and segregation. That ideology is still present and animates much of contemporary educational discourse, but it is taught in ways that are often subtle, even invisible.

Hidden Curriculum

Dominant ideologies enter the ‘common sense’ through their presence in the hidden curriculum. Schools have explicit curricula for teaching content areas, creating critical thinking skills, and other topics. However, beyond those formal lessons, schools and teachers impose ideological lessons about what is valued, valuable, and worthy,

as well as what knowledges and ways of knowing are valid (Giroux & Purpel, 1983). Those lessons are taught alongside the formal curriculum in ways that are often unnoticed. In a commonly cited example, teachers and schools often insist on standard English, implicitly signaling that other languages, ways of speaking, and ways of representing knowledge are less valid. Because schools teach some ways of knowing, establishing knowledges, or representing knowledges as ‘better’ than others, they also teach that the ideology aligned with those ‘better’ ways is superior. Students, then, come to understand whiteness and cisheterosexism as if they were ‘natural’ and more desirable. In this way, the hidden curriculum results in social reproduction. As a result of their own education in white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy, students go on to impose those same values and ideologies on others. The ideological and social systems currently in place, and which are oppressive, become reproduced in each new class of students unless they are radically interrupted (Kemmis & Fitzclarence, 1986; Giroux, 1981).

Hegemony

As a result of dominant ideologies and the hidden curriculum, social practices are established which seem benign on their face, but they act to reify oppression and domination. Because those social practices are consensual in nature, oppressed groups routinely participate in them, unknowingly contributing to their own oppression (Giroux, 1981). This process of participation in consensual social practices that reify domination is referred to as hegemony. This should not be understood as placing ‘blame’ for oppression on oppressed groups. Instead, hegemony highlights the pervasiveness of dominant ideologies and their power to structure relations to reinforce existing dominant ideologies. Sometimes referred to as a silent struggle, the powerful seek to gain the consent of those they oppressed, ultimately leading oppressed people to unwittingly participate in their own subordination (Ryan, 1976). The concept of hegemony also helps clarify why violence is not a necessary feature in oppression and domination. Violently oppressive regimes often meet with ferocious resistance. But, by instituting a set of normalized, naturalized social practices in which people voluntarily participate that reify oppressive power relations, no force is necessary, nor is coercion.

Reflecting on the current state of US sociopolitical affairs, hegemony is clear. Individuals likely to be more negatively affected by new policies and regressive laws openly support them. They do so in part because of a socially constructed reality in which participating in those efforts might lead to actual rewards. Hegemony creates a situation where “both rulers and ruled derive psychological and material rewards in the course of confirming and reconfirming their inequality” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 253). This is carried out in part through the standardization of vocabularies and representational symbols (language), which naturally limit what constitutes valid ways of being and knowing. Hegemonic systems are inherited through the systems of signs, expectations, idiomatic expressions, and available tools and technologies (Strunk,

Locke, & Martin, 2017). Researchers using critical theory often attempt to understand how dominant ideologies become infused in hidden curricula, ultimately allowing hegemony to occur.

Anti-oppressive Education and Critical Pedagogy

Although the evolution of critical theory and critical pedagogy is complicated, and scholars have questioned the centrality of Paulo Freire to initiating that move (Gottesman, 2016), he remains a pivotal figure in critical pedagogy. In shifting the attention to schools as sites of oppression and ideological reproduction, Freire (1970) critiqued the usual ‘banking model’ of education in which, “education becoming an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits that the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 72). For Freire, this model of education perpetuates the continuity of oppression and is the ‘greatest tool’ in the hands of the oppressor. Instead, Freire (1970) urged teachers to adopt a problem-posing approach to education, which is grounded on freedom and emphasizes that teachers must see themselves in a partnership with their students. This approach to education also encourages students to become social agents—challenging ways of being that oppress them and their community (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Over the years, various critical pedagogues and theorists have explored different approaches to doing the work of liberation in classrooms. These include hooks’ (2014) call for transgressive pedagogy, Giroux’s body of work on critical pedagogy, Gore’s (2003) theoretical work, and recent applications to urban education including that of Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008). Critical pedagogy is also a contested terrain, with approaches and their implications hotly debated. However, these various approaches all seek to work with education for liberatory ends. Critical pedagogues are typically most focused on how to improve classroom practices, how to help students develop critical consciousness and analyze their own experiences, and how to make classrooms liberatory and resistive spaces.

Applications for Educational Research

Applying critical theory and critical pedagogy to research requires turning the analytic focus away from individuals and onto systems. It is often all too easy to point to problematic individuals and their oppressive practices, seeking to place blame for inequity on so-called ‘bad actors’. One of the contributions of critical theory is the assertion that, even absent any bad actors, in a system where every individual acts from a place of good intentions, their placement in an ideological system that has always centered white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy will ensure they still reproduce inequitable

outcomes. In other words—while individual racists, sexists, homophobes, transphobes, ableists, and others are clearly a problem and there is merit in individual anti-bias work—systems, ideologies, and institutions must be the targets of critical inquiry.

Applied carefully, this shift in focus from individual misbehavior to systemic and ideological issues can be extremely generative. It encourages researchers to take a generous approach to participants, recognizing their actions as often a symptom rather than a cause of oppression. Again, this is not to absolve individuals of their responsibilities to act justly, but it does decenter their individual actions as part of a system. Because of that shift, critical theory work often focuses on systems, ideologies, and institutions rather than on individuals. To put this another way, the level of measurement ought not to be individuals but contexts or institutions. While one might collect data from, for example, individual teachers, administrators, or students, the analytic focus would be on the systems in which those individuals operate. The unit of analysis, in other words, ought to be beyond the individual.

Critical theory approaches also recognize the subjectivity of the researcher(s) as a key component in shaping the study. If one accepts dialectical theory, one must also accept that researchers live in relationship with their contexts, simultaneously creating and being created by them. Critical scholars, then, should engage in self-criticism and reflection to understand their own contribution to oppressive systems, the ways in which research itself can be oppressive, and how their interactions with research participants might oppress or liberate. Others in this volume have written more extensively on issues of reflexivity and positionality, but those concepts become important in a critical theory context because of the dialectical nature of lived realities.

As a theoretical framework, critical theory emphasizes the insidious nature of power—that power reinscribes itself, and power relations are reified and reproduced in each new group of individuals. So often, critical researchers will focus on how that reproduction occurs and examine ways in which the power/knowledge reproduction cycle can be interrupted. Critical theory researchers also search out and focus on generative contradictions in education. Those spaces where contradictions emerge often show the cracks in oppressive systems—they offer a point of leverage to more closely understand and also to interrupt oppression.

Limitations of Critical Theory

While many have written about the limits of a critical theory approach grounded in Marxist analysis, here we highlight a few of the concerns. Researchers have commented that, while Marxist analysis is useful in describing and understanding systems, it is often less useful in suggesting approaches to transforming systems (short of the Marxist suggestion of a full revolution). In the US context, this has been particularly true of Marxist approaches to understanding race and racism. Pure Marxist analysis tends to fall short of fully explaining or predicting race-based oppression (Leonardo, 2013). Other analyses of race point to the shortcomings of

Marxist approaches in this regard. By treating race and racism as purely ideological, these approaches are insufficient to explain how race also constrains the actions and ideologies of those constructed as White or to fully describe the ways in which race-based oppression operates. Critical race theorists and critical whiteness theorists have done much to further those explorations. Similarly queer theorists have done much to deepen the exploration of genders and sexualities. That is not to suggest that those theories expand on or grow out of critical theory—though some of those perspectives might be understood as reactions to critical theory.

The most compelling educational research often mobilizes pieces of more than one theory, pulling conceptual tools from more than one framework. In what Lather (2006) describes as paradigm proliferation, researchers can engage with multiple frameworks and ultimately arrive at entirely new theoretical constructs and analytic tools. Among those tools can be elements of critical theory and Marxist analysis. However, we encourage researchers to move beyond dogmatic adherence to a particular frame and instead to think broadly about how the range of theories have variously explored elements of oppression and liberation and how they might inform future thinking and research.

Suggested Readings

Gottesman, I. (2016). *The critical turn in education: From Marxist critique to post-structuralist feminism, to critical theories of race*. New York, NY: Routledge.

This text is extremely useful in understanding how critical approaches to educational research have evolved, responded to one another, and the history of their usage. It is also a very readable text and could probably be completed over a weekend due to its Gottesman's approachable writing style. The text is also useful in positioning various theoretical views and theorists in relationship with one another.

Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

While Giroux's work has been the subject of some criticism, this text is extremely helpful in understanding some of the key concepts in his work on critical pedagogy and is among the more heavily cited critical pedagogy works. This text is also useful in unpacking what it means to examine the ideological construction of education rather than simply examining practices or outcomes.

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